

# TEXTILE MUSEUM JOURNAL

1979



EH Hemisphere Department

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COVER: Detail of a batik sarong made in the factory of Elizabeth van Zuylen; North Java, ca. 1900 Textile Museum 1979.6.9 Gift of R.T. Hardjonagoro

The views expressed by the authors are their own: they do not necessarily reflect those of the Textile Museum.

# CONVERSATIONS WITH A BATIK MASTER

MATTIEBELLE GITTINGER

"In fact . . . I was born in a batik factory," R. T. Hardjonagoro says with a hint of humor and pride as he speaks of his own involvement with the world of batik. Recognized today as one of Indonesia's foremost batik artists, Hardjonagoro is also a scholar with a rich knowledge of the details of this art and its subtleties. In addition to designing batiks and supervising their execution in his atelier, he is keeper of the palace museum in Surakarta and an expert in court history and custom.

Generosity is also one of his qualities as the Textile Museum learned when he presented 22 textiles to the Museum in March 1979 on the occasion of the Museum's international symposium on Indonesian textiles. Drawn from his personal collection, they include a wide range of batiks, from pieces made by royal members of the Central Javanese courts to contemporary examples designed by his own hand. Batik, a wax resist process of designing cloth, is probably the most widely known and respected of Indonesia's textile arts. In the course of history these textiles have been traded throughout the world and been copied or adapted by commercial interests and artists alike. It was the breadth of this art as it has been practiced on Java that Hardjonagoro tried to represent in the pieces he gave to the Museum. In presenting the batiks he explained why he included each piece. The following draws entirely on that discussion and shares a small fraction of Hardjonagoro's familiarity with this art, its past and contemporary trends.

Even though Hardjonagoro's parents and grandparents ran a large batik factory in the West Java city of Bandung, his own participation in this art was not a foregone conclusion. Indeed, only through the intervention of President Sukarno, were Hardjonagoro's thoughts seriously turned in that direction. He became a personal friend of the late president while performing as a dancer during his university years in Jakarta. When President Sukarno learned of Hardjonagoro's family background he urged him to forego his present frivolous pursuits and return to his city of Surakarta to revive the ailing art of batik. "Go back to your city, you are doing nothing here, you are only dancing and making jokes." Hardjonagoro's return was neither direct nor psychologically easy because he lacked a clear idea of what he should do to stimulate this field. There followed a year of wandering

fraught with a spiritual malaise that ended finally with a clear revelation of what he could do. He would return to Surakarta and "marry" the styles and technique of batik from the north coast Javanese city of Pekalongan with that of Central Java. This would draw both on the bright colors and bolder forms of the coast and on the more subdued colors and conservative tastes characteristic of Central Java. To execute his plan he used the bright colored dyes from the coast, and in place of the usual white contouring of design elements practiced in that area, he outlined his figures in a muted *soga* color—a dye color common to the island's center. This required introducing aniline dyes, long known on the coast, to Surakarta batik. These man-made dyes were used not only for the bright colors, but also for the replication of the traditional muted colors. Such changes, thought radical at the time, are now practiced throughout most of Java.

The development of this new style as it has changed over the past 20 years is represented in the textiles Hardjonagoro presented to the Museum. Because many of these share the same motif, a phoenix counterbalanced with large floral forms, the other variables are clearly apparent. The earliest example (Figure 1) displays a riot of colors—pink, yellow, blue, red and brown. The elements are large; the design statement strong. In musing that we might not appreciate the combination of these extreme colors and bold forms today, Hardjonagoro points out that exaggerated statement was a temporary character shared by many of the arts, even dance, immediately after the war for independence from Dutch colonial rule. Placing the cloth in the perspective of that time, Hardjonagoro points out, "This is in fact Sukarno's taste—bright, but still very good design." While many object to this break in traditional colors and forms, Hardjonagoro takes care to explain that change can signify disciplined cultural growth, not a denial of the past. His own work continually stretches the confines of tradition.

Subsequent examples of the phoenix-floral batiks (Figure 2) may be more subdued in their color range, but they utilize large patterned background motifs that help convey the excitement of the moving forms. The most recent version of this design, done in 1979 expressly for the Textile Museum, uses still other variables. Here the similar forms appear on a hand woven

silk created in Macassar, a city on Sulawesi in eastern Indonesia. The rough surface and relatively loose weave of the cloth presented the batik worker with serious technical problems. Once completed, however, the textured background provided an intriguing element in the batik composition.

These complex expressions of the batik art have roots in more modest statements and simple batiks are also represented in the Hardjonagoro gift. Four examples of the earliest type of batik executed in Java are included in the collection. Still made for local consumption in the East Javanese region of Tuban, these are somber blue or muted red batiks with simple geometric patterns formed by a few small dots (Figure 4). Slightly more complex are two monochrome cloths with figures of birds and flowers. Made on handloomed cloth of local cotton, the textiles exhibit a surface texture that gives them a pleasing vigor.

These pieces, made today in only a few remote villages, are typical of the kind of wax resist patterning traditionally done by most common people, specifically those outside the courtly precincts or coastal zone, and they represent what Hardjonagoro chooses to call "folk batik," or *batik rakyat*. They stand in contrast to the more complex, court inspired batiks which he terms "palace batik," or *batik kraton*. The latter term covers a myriad of styles and subjects that have evolved over generations in the culturally complex courts and in select urban centers. Several examples in the collection given by Hardjonagoro represent this aspect of batik: one from the Surakarta court (Figure 5), another with designs made in two major batik centers (Figure 6), a third from a famous Dutch woman's factory (Figure 7) and lastly a piece created during World War II showing the elaboration of detail characteristic of the work of that time (Figure 8).

Topics arose during the discussion of textiles concerning the study of batik in general. Hardjonagoro described the historical relationship between the *kain panjang* and the sarong, the two major batik garments. While both are worn wrapped about the body, the former is a flat rectangle, the latter, a shorter cloth, is sewn into a tubular form. Hardjonagoro considers the *kain panjang* to be older than the sarong, basing his conclusion on ancient traditions, one of which decrees that a properly dressed woman does not wear any seamed garment. When questioned if the introduction of Islam with its strictures about sewn garments on holy pilgrimages

may have been the source of this dress code, he thought not and cited additional evidence founded in custom that would support the antiquity of the *kain panjang* form. For example, people may never enter the palace wearing a sarong nor may people visit holy graves wearing this piece of clothing. As important for him was a custom for treating sick children. In villages even today, the first thing a mother does for a sick child is to reach for the inside corner of the *kain panjang* she wears and to wipe the child's face with the exposed corner. The critical element involved in this act is the narrow border that marks the end of the *kain panjang*. If this were sewn into the seam of a sarong, the *kain* would lose its power according to Hardjonagoro.

Hardjonagoro also spoke about the inherent relationship of the batik artist's inner thoughts and feelings and the design being worked. Because of this interrelationship fine batiks carry their creator's conscious and subconscious essence and some may even be viewed as mystic precursors of fate. Hardjonagoro says great batiks evince the philosophy and the quality of the batik artist and have a "charisma" that makes lesser works pale in comparison. Indeed, he suggests that batiks of varying quality be juxtaposed to see how evident are those that lack this depth. These batiks are superficial, flat and lack "charisma." The dynamic quality of a batik results



**Fig. 1** Kain panjang  
Pattern: Kukila peksowani latar merah muda  
Batik on commercial cotton  
Surakarta, 1960s.  
250 x 105 cm  
Textile Museum 1979.6.12

from the total involvement of the artist. She starts with an idea, and only later is the cloth given a name which often mirrors the mystical relation between the maker and her design.

The origin of the art remains a problem. Hardjonagoro tends to follow his former mentor Dr. Chan Chu Song who thought batik came to Java from south China in a stencil form. Designs were first painted on paper, then cut out, with the remaining stencil glued to the cloth. The stencil, together with the glue, acted as the resist when the cloth was dyed. Hardjonagoro agrees with this hypothesis when tested against the *lokcan* batik (Figure 4), a batik with dark forms on a light background, obviously embodying motifs of Chinese origin. However, he hesitates when Central Javanese batiks are mentioned. Here the designs appear in white on a dark ground, a reverse scheme of contrast and one not easily effected by a stencil. For this batik, mostly associated with Java, Hardjonagoro has no ready answer as to origin.

### Figure 1

"There may be a dot out of place in some pieces, but in this piece there is not one dot in error. Such a piece would require five months to make," Hardjonagoro says as he points to the meticulous arrangement of dots which adds shading and tone to the forms. Much of the filling design, the *isen-isen*, was done with *soga* dyes; before this the cloth was waxed and the background of pink and regions of blue were dyed. The cloth was then boiled to remove all the wax and then rewaxed to permit the dyeing of the light brown of the outline, the red and dark brown colors. The phoenix bird is called *Kukila peksowani*, *Kukila* meaning bird and *peksowani* in reference to a holy spear by that name in the palace treasure in Surakarta. Balancing this in the design is the *kembang sepatu* or double hibiscus design.

Other batik examples in the Hardjonagoro gift use this basic design but with varying details and more muted colors supplanting the pure palette of this early example. None, however, exceed this in excellence of craftsmanship. We should recall that when Hardjonagoro praises the workmanship of the batiks he is praising the women batikers who execute his designs.



**Fig. 2** Kain panjang  
Pattern: Kukila peksowani gendala giri parang rusak temurun  
Batik on commercial cotton  
Surakarta, 1970s  
258 x 107 cm.  
Textile Museum 1979.6.14

### Figure 2

"I don't like to lose the value of our traditions, but culture must rise, it must grow, though growing does not mean undisciplined growth." Hardjonagoro practices this philosophy in his batik work as in the example shown here in which he uses the *parang rusak* in the background. This traditional design, once sacred in the courts of Java, has here been modified by being used not in one size as is usually the custom, but in three sizes. This subtly alters the background and interjects a slight tension in the composition. In keeping with tradition, however, the cloth lacks the narrow surrounding border, the *seretan*, found on other batiks. The lack of a border suggests not only the infinite nature of the motif, but also the superiority of a ruler who would wear it, a ruler beyond the control of others.

All of the dyes are aniline imitations of traditional colors. The cloth was waxed and dipped first in red, then in blue dye. After being soaked in water for a day the wax not required for the next dye sequence was scraped away, not boiled off. New applications of wax were applied and the cloth dyed in two shades of brown. This version of *parang* is called *parang rusak sente* because it has no blue in the diamond shapes which occur between the diagonal rows, according to Hardjonagoro.

**Figure 3**

This contemporary batik, designed by Hardjonagoro, incorporates two royal patterns, the *kawung* and the *(be)ringin sungsan*. The *kawung* is the four-lobed pattern in the background, associated primarily with Jogjakarta, but here inspired by a rendering on the head cloth of the first leader of Madiun. This city to the east of Jogjakarta has closely followed the traditions of the latter, but its leader may never wear a *kawung* exactly like those in the Jogjakarta court. For this reason the *kawung* of Madiun lacks the cross-hatching, the *caca gori*, usually found in the center of the four lobes of this design in Jogjakarta. All *kawung* are white with the exception of the one made for the goddess of the South Sea which, according to Hardjonagoro, is described as being black in old manuscripts.

The second sacred design, the *(be)ringin sungsan*, is the brown configuration set on a deep blue background in the rondels. This represents an inverted banyan tree which, Hardjonagoro says, is the form also seen in the moon. "It stands for wisdom and justice and brings good luck." The colors of the cloth are blue, brown and white.

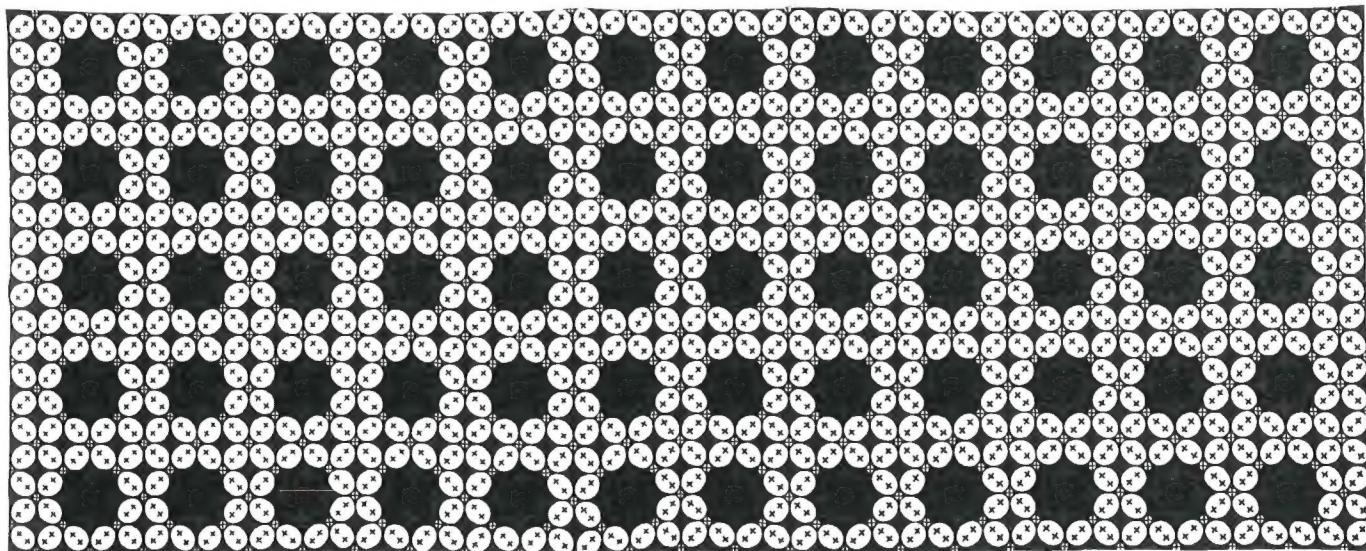
**Figure 4**

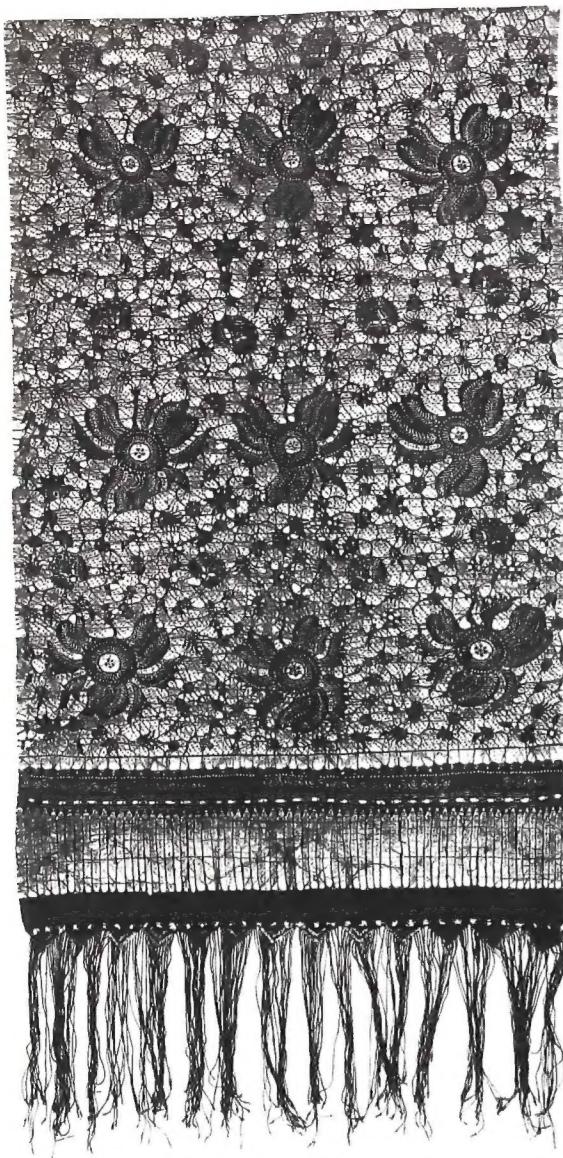
This *slendang* or shoulder cloth of hand-spun and handwoven cotton, representing what Hardjonagoro calls "folk batik", has a batik floral design called *kenanga ginubah* worked in a single color, blue. He considers this floral design an old one because the name, *kenanga ginubah*, is also the name of a pamor, or worked metal design, used on the *keris*, the sword sacred in Javanese custom. The floral design may also be seen as a bird, a visual ambiguity more common in calligraphic forms in Java. Hardjonagoro says this cloth is a type called *lokcan*, a Chinese term usually associated with silk batik. It is appropriately applied here because the figures appear dark on the white ground scattered with small blue dots. The dots were created by piercing the wax layer with pins. Because Chinese influence is prevalent in the Tuban area of East Java where this was made, Hardjonagoro speculates that this type of batik may even have originated in China.

Shoulder cloths such as this have large areas batikked in imitation of a fringe as well as real fringes that are plied and knotted in decorative ways.

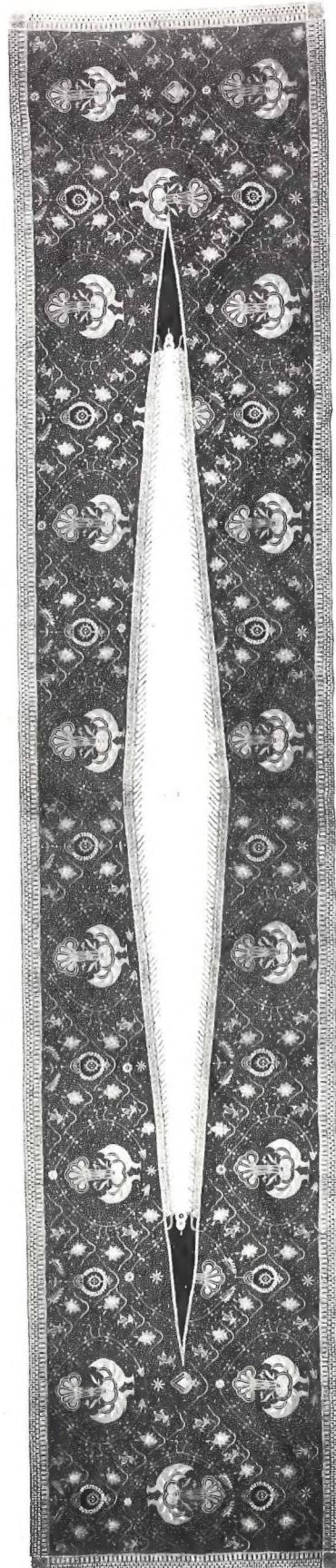
**Fig. 3** Dress material

Pattern: Kawung tenun blaco  
Batik on handwoven cloth  
Surakarta, 1970s  
296 x 117 cm.  
Textile Museum 1979.6.19

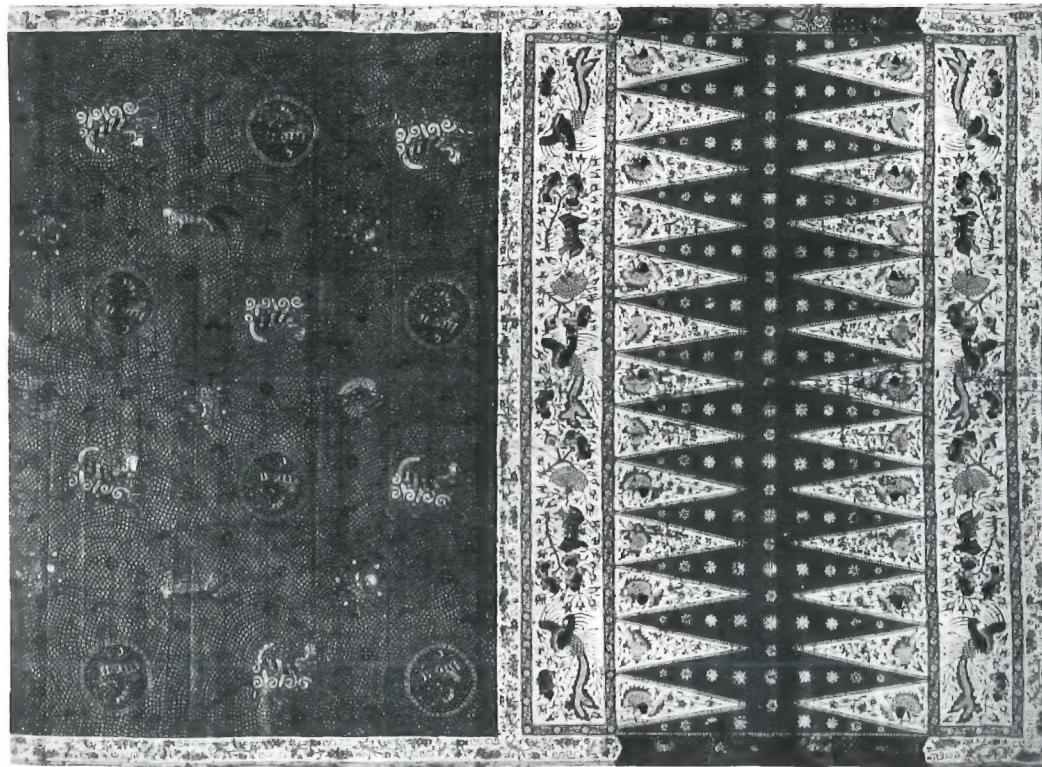




**Fig. 4** Slendang (shoulder cloth)  
Design: Kenanga ginubah  
Batik on handspun and handwoven cotton  
Kerek (Tuban area) East Java, 1979  
340 x 57 cm.  
Textile Museum 1979.6.3



**Fig. 5** Kemben (Indo.); Sinjang ciut (Java.); breast cloth  
Pattern: Semen cuwiri latar hitam  
Batik and appliquéd; commercial cotton and silk.  
Surakarta, Java, ca. 1916  
254 x 52 cm.  
Textile Museum 1979.6.5



**Figure 5**

This breast wrapper epitomizes court art, having actually been made by Queen Paku Buana XI when that accomplished individual, now more than 80 years old, was 15. The batik process is used to make small complex designs in indigo and *soga* browns. The smooth, even surface of the commercial cotton permits precision of line and color juxtaposition.

In the center is a large diamond-shaped field over which is appliquéd a magenta-colored silk. Only royal ladies of the highest level could add color to the center of their *kembang*. Women of slightly lesser rank had breast cloths with an unadorned central diamond shape while common women wore plain wrappers without this central element.

The pattern worked in batik is known as *semen*, traditionally interpreted as the budding or sprouting of plants. Hardjonagoro, however, contends that the root of the word, *semi*, means "to grow up" in the sense of increase, and has nothing to do with plants. Here, the reference is to an increase in fertility because the major design associates rice grains and water: the scattered brown dots of the background indicate rice, the white dots represent mist, while the undulating, parallel lines symbolize water. The undulating, parallel lines become a mountain when white appears be-

**Fig. 6** Sarong  
 Pattern: Gendala giri  
 Batik on commercial cotton  
 Lasem and Surakarta ca. 1900  
 200 x 105 cm.  
 Textile Museum 1979.6.8

tween the paired lines. Hardjonagoro interprets the circular design in the midst of the water symbols as the coat of arms of the palace of Surakarta; more traditionally this is interpreted as the inverted tree according to Garrett Solyom of Hawaii.

**Figure 6**

This cloth has designs dyed in two different geographic areas which give it the general name *dua negri*, meaning two countries. More specifically the pattern is named *gendala giri* meaning "alarm." This designation arises from the red color in the borders and central portion of the sarong. These red design elements and possibly the animal figures in the body of the cloth were done in the East Java city of Lasem. Renown throughout all of Java for its proficiency in use of the natural red dye, *kudu* or *mengkudu* (*Morinda citrifolia*), this city was frequently a partner in making *dua negri* batiks. From Lasem this example was returned to Surakarta for the addition of the



**Fig. 7** Sarong  
 Pattern: Boketan van Zuylen  
 Batik on commercial cotton  
 Pekalongan. ca. 1900  
 199 x 108 cm.  
 Textile Museum 1979.6.9

*gringsing*, or fish scale design, in the background which, Hardjonagoro says, symbolizes wealth and fertility and for the brown and blue dyeing. With the advent of aniline dyes such regional dye specialties have virtually disappeared and today this textile would be made entirely in Lasem.

#### Figure 7

Many foreign elements appear in batik design encouraged by the commercial structure that evolved around the making of some batik in the 19th century. Chinese and Europeans, many of them Dutch women, became operators of batik factories that centralized all stages in the manufacture of batik and often created designs for a particular market. In this way European subjects, flowers and floral arrangements were designed for the Dutch living in Java who had adopted aspects of the more comfortable local costume. According to Hardjonagoro, the Chinese, in emulation of the Dutch, also made these designs in their

factories and wore sarong with these designs, thus adding to the number and significance of these types of batiks.

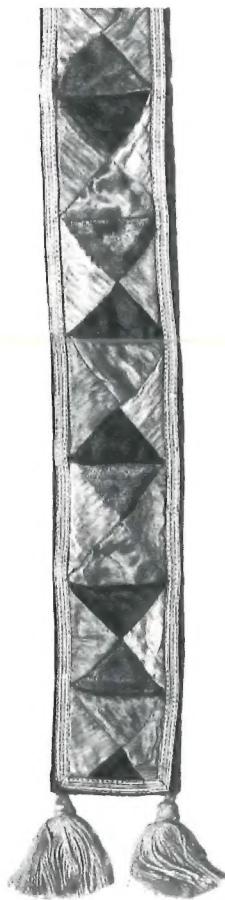
Of the batik enterprises one of the most famous was that run by Elizabeth van Zuylen, a Dutch lady who lived in Pekalongan. She signed many of her works including this example among Hardjonagoro's gift. Here as in many of her batiks, the motif is a cluster of flowers picked from a temperate garden (not a tropical one). The floral colors are reds, pinks, and blues set on a background crossed by gentle rain; the head of the sarong has a deep green ground.

#### Figure 8

Some batik done along the north coast during the Japanese occupation of Java in World War II is well recognized for its elaborate design and color. Cotton was scarce, but since people needed work more time was invested in designing each piece. Not until now has it been generally recognized what was oc-



**Fig. 8** Kain panjang  
Pattern type: Jawa Hokokai  
Batik on commercial cotton  
Surakarta 1940s  
243 x 105 cm.  
Textile Museum 1979.6.10



**Fig. 9** Samir (ritual stole of office) detail  
Appliqué  
Velvet and silk; gold braid and cotton tassels  
Surakarta 1870s  
125 x 5 cm.  
Textile Museum 1979.6.22

curing to batik stylistically in the central principalities during this period where these same conditions prevailed. This textile illustrates at least one way in which the style in Central Java was effected. The colors remain the traditional indigo blue and *soga* brown, but the design becomes more intricate. For instance, the lines of the *gringsing* pattern in the background are here a double line of dots which represents a staggering investment of labor. Similar minute elaboration marks the wings of butterflies and petals of flowers. This type of *isen-isen*, or filling design, of dots comes from this war period, according to Hardjonagoro, and continues until about the time of the war for independence. When questioned about the unusual motifs of cupids or winged angels that occur in this cloth, Hardjonagoro said such motifs were common in the occupation period and reflected the pervading feel of a loss "of our own traditions."

#### Figure 9

Included in the collection was a narrow appliqué strip called a *samir*. This was worn around the neck in the manner of a stole by the highest ranking woman of the Surakarta court. It marked her as bearer of the title Raden Aju Adipati Sedah Mirah who served as caretaker of court heirlooms including textiles, the golden throne, the gold peacock feathers, the eight golden sacred animals, the spears, and the gamelan orchestra. Hardjonagoro believes only four or five other *samir* are in existence and that the one given to the Museum, which belonged to the last Sedah Mirah, is over 100 years old. It carries a "holy *tambal*" design worked by silk segments appliquéd to red velvet backing. The original colors of the *tambal*, now slightly faded, were red, black, silver-white and purple. In Surakarta this badge of guardianship was worn by the highest ranking woman, although in Jogjakarta it was used by the sultan himself.

The conversation with Hardjonagoro occurred in March, 1979, in the Textile Museum. Others who participated were Mary Jane Leland, Los Angeles, Garrett and Bronwen Solyom, Hawaii and Alit Veldhuisen-Djajasoebrata, Rotterdam.